

Sinhala as the Medium of Instruction in a Muslim School: Factors Shaping the Students' Linguistic Identity

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Sri Lankan linguistic landscape has been influenced by its colonial history and post-independence attempts to establish a national identity. During the British colonial era, English as the dominant language of education created a linguistic divide. Under the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, Sinhala became the official language and primary medium of instruction in schools marginalizing Tamil speakers, and English as a secondary language remained prominent in professional contexts. In post-independent Sri Lanka, Muslim pupils had the privilege of pursuing their studies in Sinhala, Tamil or English, and public Muslim schools were established mainly for religious education. This study focused on the only Muslim public school in the North-Western Province in Sri Lanka where Sinhala has become the dominant medium of instruction. Accordingly, the study examined how socio-economic factors influenced Muslim students' choice of Sinhala as the primary language of instruction in a Sinhala medium public school setting while examining the institutional practices and policies that shape this language preference. To gather data, the study utilized a survey with students, interviews with teachers, and classroom observations. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that Sinhala is not only the medium of instruction but also the preferred language of education for many students (60.4%) who find it easier than Tamil despite their cultural attachment to it. Early exposure to Sinhala-medium nurseries further normalizes Sinhala as their primary academic language. Parental influence also reinforces this preference. Consequently, there is a request and tendency to do teaching and learning in Sinhala, with limited demand for Tamil or English instruction. The marginalization of Tamil despite home use is highlighted by the finding that 85.4% of the participants speak Tamil at home, whereas 14.6% speak Sinhala along with Tamil at home. Although all the students' first language is Tamil, they struggle to read and write in Tamil. None of the students responded in Tamil in the questionnaire, showing a lack of written and reading proficiency. Tamil is officially the second language in the school, but it remains minimally practiced. The study identified socio-economic motivations for Sinhala preference by the students and their parents. They believe that Sinhala is essential for social and economic integration in the Sinhala-majority region where the village is located.

They need Sinhala, the majority and dominant language in Sri Lanka, to engage in trade and business, work in shops, visit hospitals, access government services, etc. Their prior intention is to survive in the Sinhala-majority society. There is an institutional influence on students' language choice as the school follows a Sinhala-medium curriculum, with even Islam subjects being taught in Sinhala by the only Muslim teacher in school using a Sinhala medium textbook. The principal and the rest of the teachers are Sinhalese and not proficient in Tamil. Moreover, only two English teachers are present, indicating limited emphasis on English instruction. The Zonal Education authority does not oppose the Sinhala-medium instruction in the school. However, 39.6% of students preferred Tamil as the medium of instruction. The study identified that in this Sinhala-medium Muslim school, socio-economic realities and institutional structure drive the students' preference for Sinhala. Tamil, the first language of the students, and English which is recognized as important, are undervalued and taught minimally within the school due to community-driven language priorities. This linguistic environment reflects a shift in the linguistic identity of the students shaped by the Sinhala dominant post-independence language policies. There is a need to consider language practices in such schools to ensure that the students can navigate the Sinhala-dominant context without entirely displacing their first language.

Keywords: Muslim school, Tamil, Sinhala as the medium of instruction, Post-independence policies, Linguistic identity